

Ursula Ludz, Diplomsoziologin, Tutzing, beschäftigt sich seit 1984 als Übersetzerin und Herausgeberin mit dem Werk von Hannah Arendt.

Zuletzt erschien von ihr herausgegeben: Hannah Arendt und Martin Heidegger, *Briefe 1925 bis 1975 und andere Zeugnisse aus den Nachlässen*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2., durchges. Aufl., 1999.

# A Response to Margaret Canovan<sup>1</sup>

1 I am grateful to G. L. Ulmen for "englishing" a first draft version of this manuscript.

2 In the historical sciences, methodologically Arendt's approach belongs to the *Verstehen* (understanding) schools. Her views can best be studied in her 1953 essay "Understanding and Politics", which has been republished with additional material in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York etc.: Harcourt Brace & Comp., 1994). As for the descriptive aspect, her most succinct formulation is found in her "Reply" to Eric Voegelin (full reference in the following note), where she writes: "If I moralized or became sentimental, I simply did not do well what I was supposed to do, namely to describe the totalitarian phenomenon as occurring, not on the moon, but in the midst of human society" (p. 79, italics added).

3 Eric Voegelin, "The Origins of Totalitarianism", in: *The Review of Politics*, v. 15 (January 1953), pp. 68-76; followed by "A Reply" by Hannah Arendt (pp. 76-84), and a "Concluding Remark" by Eric Voegelin (pp. 84-85). Quotations on pages 71 and 70, respectively. This material recently was published in German together with the "Preface" and "Concluding Remarks" from the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, translated by U. Ludz with a commentary by Ingeborg Nordmann, as *Berichte und Studien Nr. 17* of the Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung e.V. an der Technischen Universität Dresden. Copies may be purchased from the Institute.

4 An unpublished carbon copy of this document is among the Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.), Container 19, Folder "Guggenheim Memorial Foundation". Cf. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven-London: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 276ff.

Dear Margaret Canovan,

At the closure of your article, "Beyond Understanding? Arendt's Account of Totalitarianism" (*Hannah Arendt Newsletter*, No. 1, April 1999, pp. 25-30), you ask if anyone "can help you out with comments or suggestions" regarding what Arendt "had in mind". I do not know whether I can. But I will try to explain my reading of Arendt in this respect with some remarks on the history of Arendt's book on totalitarianism. Of course, some of these remarks concern matters quite familiar to you and in part mentioned in your article. However, there is a difference in our views which is pertinent to the issue you raise.

When Hannah Arendt wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she wanted to do nothing more and nothing less than trace the "elements" and "origins" of total rule, as the German title indicates: *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*. She characterizes this approach as "historical" and "descriptive", and this seems right.<sup>2</sup> In any case, Eric Voegelin praised the book as a "historical study of respectable rank" evoking "the grand manner" of historiography as established by Thucydides. He also observed that the book cannot be understood "without its emotional motivation", i.e., without the author's shock at what had happened under Nazi rule in particular.<sup>3</sup> This shock is especially manifest in the "Concluding Remarks".

Arendt herself was aware of the fact that her book lacked the philosophical and/or theoretical dimension which she, being a philosopher by training, owed to herself. This we know, for example, from the application she wrote to the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation to get support for a follow-up study on "Totalitarian Elements in Marxism".<sup>4</sup> But the clearest indication of this is found in the essay by which she replaced the "Concluding Remarks" in the German edition of her book (1955) and in all other editions thereafter: "Ideology and Terror".

Since we usually read and quote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in its revised version, we have a tendency to overlook the fact that chapters 1-12 were based on a different approach than was the new last chapter, i.e. chapter 13. This has led to misunderstandings, one of which is that chapter 13 offers "conclusions" about "what totalitarianism actually is" (your page 25).

Chapter 13 is a philosophical essay in the Arendtian style. It was written for a *Festschrift (Offener Horizont)* for Karl Jaspers on the occasion of his 70th birthday in 1953. In my view, it is indicative of the kind of studies Arendt later called "exercises in political thought".

In "Ideology and Terror", which in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is subtitled "A Novel Form of Government", Arendt asks herself whether totalitarianism can be "compared with and defined like other forms of

government such as Western thought has known and recognized since the times of ancient philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> Her guide in answering this question is Montesquieu, from whose *De l’Esprit des lois* she gets her lead: “Il y a cette différence entre la nature du gouvernement et son principe, que la nature est ce qui le fait être tel; et son principe ce qui le fait agir.”<sup>6</sup> This quotation becomes the basis upon which she develops a kind of a typology of forms of government (cf. your page 28). Although Arendt does not say so, I would argue that this typology evidences some Weberian ideal-type thinking.

But the more important difference in our interpretations is another one. In “Ideology and Terror”, Arendt remains within her chosen framework of identifying forms of government she borrowed from Montesquieu. Reflecting on the historical and descriptive part of her exposition in the light of this framework, she tries to come to terms with it or, as you say (page 25), to encompass it in thought. As I see it, this is all the essay is about. Within the Montesquieu framework, Arendt found an answer to her question. She identifies totalitarianism as a form of government whose “nature” (or “essence”) is “terror”, and whose “principle of action” is “the logicity of ideological thinking.”<sup>7</sup> As regards the “basic experience in the living-together of men” in the political system thus identified, she introduces the concept of “loneliness”, while she holds that loneliness corresponds to the “experience of being together with equally strong other men” (fellow citizens) in a republic, and to the experience of “honor” or “distinction” in a monarchy.

No “theory” of totalitarianism is intended, or even is the conclusion at hand, i.e. that totalitarianism constitutes a “novel form of government”, clearly stated. On the contrary, shortly after she completed “Ideology and Terror”, Arendt expressed general doubts about this conclusion in her remarks on Carl J. Friedrich’s theses on totalitarianism: “Seen in the light of political science, his [i.e., Friedrich’s] thesis that ‘totalitarian society is historically unique and *sui generis*’ can only mean that totalitarian domination constitutes a novel form of government. This conclusion

seems inevitable; yet it is extremely daring. For throughout our history there have been few forms of government, all of them already known to and described by the ancients. It seems so unlikely that we of all people should be confronted with a novel form of government.”<sup>8</sup>

I trust that these remarks will suffice to demonstrate how our readings of Arendt’s “account of totalitarianism” differ. To summarize my argument: It seems to me that most questions you raise lie beyond the scope of Arendt’s intentions and writing. Only at the end of your paper, do I find common ground, which I would put this way. Arendt, the historian or story-teller, wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* because she wanted to tell us something. She may even have wanted us to ask ourselves just this question: “What exactly is she up to?” (your page 29) – maybe without the qualifying adverb “exactly”, but perhaps with the thought in the back of her mind that she may have told a story she herself did not fully understand.

What she wanted to tell us no doubt runs along the lines suggested in your last paragraphs. It can also be taken from what you wrote in the “conclusion” to the chapter on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in your book, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*.<sup>9</sup> But in my view, we have to stop here, i.e. at the point of telling stories “along the lines of ...” that make sense, and have to draw our conclusions. There will never be one “true” interpretation. Indeed, what defines Arendt’s legacy above all is her proposal of ongoing thinking, of moving in the gap between past and future, as she argues when she introduces her “exercises in political thought” in the preface of *Between Past and Future*.

There remains the problem of totalitarianism “as a subject”. This, I hope, will come up again when Hanna Pitkin’s book, *The Attack of the Blob*, is discussed in future issues of the *Newsletter*.

Yours, Ursula Ludz

5 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition with added prefaces (San Diego etc.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, a Harvest/HBJ Book, 1979), p. 461. Hereafter, this edition is cited as OT. The page numbers are the same as in the edition used by M. Canovan.

6 Montesquieu, *De l’Esprit des lois*, book 3, ch. 1. My interpretation here and hereafter is based on the German version of “Ideology and Terror”. Apparently, changes were made when the essay, originally written in German as “Ideologie und Terror” (and in this form added to *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*), was translated into English. In my view, chapter 13 of OT is less lucid than its German counterpart. Nevertheless, for both one can argue that Arendt did not render her book good service by replacing the “Concluding Remarks” with “Ideologie und Terror” and “Ideology and Terror”, respectively.

7. OT, 474.

8 See Arendt in *Totalitarianism: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, March 1953*, edited with an introduction by Carl J. Friedrich (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1954), pp. 75f.

9 Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 61f.